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A Tight Race In Victoria; Growing Support For Tougher Environmental Policies Could Tip Scales

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Body

Irritated by a loud grumbling noise coming from the fridge in the backroom of her campaign office, Racelle Kooy reaches over and wallops the thing once with a heavy fist. The humming from the fridge cuts out for a moment, then carries on as before.

"I guess I don't have the Fonzie touch," she says, in reference to the '80s television character who would jump-start electrical appliances with his fists.

The modesty of the Green party candidate's campaign office, with its groaning appliances and cramped spaces, represents a contrast of sorts to other candidates in Victoria. A short distance away, NDP candidate Laurel Collins runs her campaign out of a roomier space adorned with orange streamers, a handful of volunteers working away at a neat row of desks.

The Green Party has always run more unpolished (some would call it "grassroots") campaigns than its opponents - even compared with the cash-strapped NDP, a perpetual third wheel of Canadian politics. Under Elizabeth May, the Greens have remained a fringe political party, despite her ability to rapidly grow its broader support in recent years.

For several elections now, pollsters and pundits alike have predicted that a Green wave would take hold in Canada, only for it to remain a lone voice in the House of Commons (that finally changed after Paul Manly's byelection win in nearby Nanaimo-Ladysmith earlier this year, which gave them their second seat).

But in Victoria, growing support for tougher environmental policies could finally push the party over the two-seat threshold. Kooy's election bid in the city is among the Green's best chances of expanding its seat count in Canada, campaign officials say. In the neighbouring riding of Esquimalt-Saanich- Sooke, Green hopeful David Merner is another serious challenger to the NDP, which won six of seven seats on Vancouver Island in 2015.

The NDP is especially vulnerable in Victoria after Murray Rankin, a veteran MP, announced he would not seek re-election, leaving Collins to retain a seat the party has held since 2006.

It's a city decidedly consumed by the environmental cause. Protesters blockaded a bridge in early October that connected the city to its major arteries, angering many residents. Some counsellors offer services for people suffering from "eco-grief," a sense of despair triggered by the coming end of the world. The city this year, like several others, declared a "climate emergency" amid rising greenhouse gas emissions.

A Tight Race In Victoria; Growing Support For Tougher Environmental Policies Could Tip Scales

A heavy environmental bent has turned Victoria into especially arid terrain for Liberal leader Justin Trudeau, whose government purchased the Trans Mountain pipeline in the summer of 2018. The decision was a line in the sand for many residents.

"There was no moment of greater betrayal - other than perhaps the failure of electoral reform - than the purchase of TMX," says Matthew Watson, a 29-year-old software developer who lives in Victoria.

"It's a very raw feeling here," he said.

At a recent debate in a brick church on the edge of Victoria's downtown, audience members loudly jeered Liberal candidate Nikki Macdonald when she suggested that a transition away from fossil fuels could not be achieved essentially overnight, arguing that Trudeau's environmental policy was necessarily realistic.

"He recognizes, as I do, that we can't flip a switch and go from fossil fuels to clean energy," Macdonald said to grumbles and head shakes.

Kelly Kerr, a social worker who lives in nearby Esquimalt, said wariness of Trudeau is widespread, citing his record on pipelines after promising ambitious environmental policies.

"He has just blatantly lied to us," she says. Kerr has voted for the NDP in past elections, but said she was "strongly" leaning toward the Greens this time around, mostly for environmental reasons.

Merner ran for the Liberal Party in Esquimalt in 2015, but switched to the Greens this time around, citing the TMX purchase and Ottawa's failure to introduce electoral reform.

Liberal campaign officials say the region is much more centrist than public displays of eco-activism might suggest. But the party has lost ground in the city since 2006, regularly performing more or less equal to the Conservatives. Anti-Trudeau sentiments could give a nudge to Conservative candidate Richard Caron this time around, though the Tories have not won a seat in the city since 1984.

Caron acknowledges that a strong environmental sentiment in the city, but said many residents are open to what he calls more pragmatic policies.

"I understand that they have a very comprehensive environmental plan, but to me it doesn't go hand-in-hand with the economics of this country," he said.

The NDP and Greens, for their part, are putting forward increasingly ambitious policies in a bid to outdo one another, some that appear to have little practical grounding.

Both are heavily opposed to fracking, a process in which oil and gas producers inject drilling fluids underground at extremely high pressure, in turn fracturing deep-lying rock formations and allowing oil to flow to surface. The process is used in much of the natural gas production in northern B.C. and Alberta, which will eventually feed into liquefied natural gas (LNG) facilities on the West Coast. That LNG, proponents say, could go a long way in helping Asian countries wean themselves off coal, a much more emissions-intensive fossil fuel.

The Greens say, with some authority, that the NDP position on fracking remains unclear. Collins declined to specify whether she would support a major LNG project in Canada, which would ultimately require Cabinet approval.

The NDP has proposed a \$15-billion climate plan, spent over four years, aimed at lowering emissions and shifting away from fossil fuels. It includes a \$3-billion "climate bank," that would appear to function similarly to the Liberal government's Canada Infrastructure Bank, a \$35-billion institution that invests in clean energy, among other things.

Other policies involve government funds for eco-friendly housing retrofits, plans to widen electrical car adoption through public spending, and a vague commitment to meet Canada's 2030 Paris targets.

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Collins, a city councillor in Victoria, shrugs off any pressure that might come from replacing Rankin, who was recently appointed chair of the new National Security and Intelligence Committee.

"Murray is leaving big shoes to fill," she says.

But Collins says the NDP remain as popular as ever in the riding, due in part to the party's dual focus on social issues as well as the environment.

"The NDP understands the connection between social inequality and the climate crisis."

Kooy, a member of the Samahquam First Nation, roundly rejects any suggestion that the Greens are a single-issue party. The Greens make similar claims to the NDP about "renewing the social contract" and expanding government services.

In the past Kooy led a communications team for a First Nations community that rejected the Ajax copper and gold mine planned for development near Kamloops, B.C. The project, proposed by Polish firm KGHM Polska Miedz, was also rejected by the federal government in 2018, which officially quashed the project.

Kooy decided to run for the seat before Rankin announced he was stepping down, she says, spurred on by a multitude of factors, foremost the purchase of the Trans Mountain pipeline.

"It was one of the reasons I got motivated," Kooy says. "This does not make sense to me at all, this is a sunset industry."

"As much as I see there's progressive movement here in Victoria, people are engaged here in Victoria, I didn't see the steps necessary to take truly long-term views," she says.

The Green's environmental platform is an eye-watering display of public interventionism, including the complete phase-out of heavy oil projects by 2035 and a transition toward 100 per cent emissions-free electricity generation by 2030.

Kooy rejects criticism that even a complete phase-out of oil and gas in Canada would only put a small dent in global greenhouse gas emissions, saying the country needs to "show leadership" on the issue.

Over the drone of the refrigerator she explains that the party's plans would not sacrifice current workers in favour of future ones, but provides little detail on how.

Even so, she seems to get the finer details right: Before an interview with the National Post, she offers water served in a perfectly non-controversial way, straight from the tap and served in a white porcelain mug.

"We're straight out of the faucet people." !@COPYRIGHT=© 2019 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

Graphic

Kevin Light, Reuters; Green party Leader Elizabeth May and candidate David Merner (Esquimalt-Saanich-Sooke) speak about the party's climate plan mission in Victoria earlier this month.;

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